

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 VIENTIANE 0123

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
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SUBJECT: LAO-THAI RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION: THERE FOLLOWS AN OVERVIEW OF THAI-LAO
RELATIONS SINCE THE OCTOBER 20 CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT IN
BANGKOK. (FOR AN EXCELLENT SUMMARY OF DEVELOPMENTS IN
LAO-THAI RELATIONS THROUGH THE FIRST TEN MONTHS OF 1977
SEE REFTTEL.) SEPARATE MESSAGES DEAL WITH LAO RELATIONS
WITH EACH OF THE OTHER ASEAN STATES WITH MISSIONS IN
VIENTIANE. WE WILL SUBMIT A FINAL SUMMARY OF LAO-ASEAN
RELATIONS. END INTRODUCTION.

1. THOUGH THE THAI GOVERNMENT WHICH TOOK OVER IN
OCTOBER 1977 FEATURED A FAMILIAR CAST OF MILITARY
FIGURES, THE LPDR EARLY REGISTERED CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM
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ABOUT THE CHANGE. AN EARLY PLEDGE BY ADMIRAL SA NGAD
TO SEEK IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH THE INDOCHINESE COUN-
TRIES APPARENTLY ENCOURAGED THE LAO. THE LAO NONE THE-
LESS CONDITIONED THEIR OWN HOPES FOR IMPROVED RELATIONS
ON THE REALIZATION OF SA NGAD'S PROMISE NOT TO FOLLOW
THE POLICIES OF THE FORMER THAI PRIME MINISTER THANIN.

2. IN THE ENSUING THREE MONTHS, THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLEMICAL ACCRETIONS WHICH HAD FORMED ABOUT THAI-LAO RELATIONS IN THE YEAR OF THANIN'S RULE AND WHICH HAD LIMITED THE MANEUVERABILITY OF THAI AND LAO DIPLOMATS BEGAN TO DROP AWAY. A THAI IMPOSED PARTIAL EMBARGO ON GOODS TRANSITING FROM AND THROUGH THAILAND TO LAOS WAS LIFTED. LAO FUEL SHORTAGES WERE THEREBY ALLEVIATED, AND THE LAO WERE PROMPTED TO AGREE TO THE RESUMPTION OF BANGKOK/VIENTIANE AIR SERVICE WHICH HAD BEEN CANCELLED BY THE LAO BECAUSE OF THE EMBARGO. REGULAR AIR SERVICE, NOW OPERATING TWICE A WEEK, WAS FORMALIZED IN A BILATERAL AIR AGREEMENT SIGNED IN BANGKOK DECEMBER 12 BY THAI DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER WONGSE PHONNIKON AND LAO MFA CHEF DE CABINET SOUBANH SRITHIRATH. COMMENTING ON THE SIGNING, SOUBANH SAID THAT "ALTHOUGH THE AGREEMENT CONCENTRATES ON AIR SERVICE, IT IS HOPED THAT IT WILL LEAD TO THE OPENING OF COOPERATION IN OTHER FIELDS."

3. SOUBANH'S HOPES WERE PARTIALLY REALIZED WHEN ON JANUARY 25, WONGSE TRAVELED TO VIENTIANE AT THE HEAD OF A TEN MAN DELEGATION BEARING THAI AID IN THE AMOUNT OF 150 TONS OF RICE AND SOME SALT. WHILE A SIMILAR JOURNEY TO VIENTIANE BY WONGSE IN MAY 1977 TO MARK THE CONCLUSION OF A RELATIVELY SMALL SCALE THAI AID PROGRAM APPEARED TO BREAK NO NEW GROUND, THIS VISIT APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN MORE SUCCESSFUL. AMONG THE RESULTS OF THE CONFIDENTIAL

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TALKS WERE: A PROPOSAL BY THE LAO THAT THE TWO SIDES ESTABLISH A JOINT WORKING GROUP TO DEAL WITH SPECIFIC BILATERAL PROBLEMS; A LAO REQUEST THAT THAILAND OPEN FIVE ADDITIONAL BORDER POINTS; LAO INTEREST IN EXPANDED THAI-LAO TRADE (VOICED BY DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER NOUHAK); A LAO REQUEST THAT THE THAI WITHDRAW THE RIVER PATROL UNITS ON THE MEKONG; AND A THAI REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON THE NUMBER AND WELFARE OF THAI CITIZENS BEING HELD PRISONER BY THE LAO. (THE EMBASSY HAS ALSO RECEIVED UNCONFIRMED REPORTS THAT THE PROBLEM OF LAO REFUGEES WAS ALSO DISCUSSED.) THE THAI REPORTEDLY PROMISED TO CARRY THE LAO REQUESTS AND PROPOSAL BACK TO BANGKOK FOR CONSIDERATION, WHILE THE LAO PLEDGED TO SPEED UP THE TRIALS OF THAI CITIZENS.

4. IN WHAT APPEARED TO BE AN ATTEMPT TO SET A GOOD TONE FOR THE TALKS ON THE EVE OF THE WONGSE VISIT, THE THAI GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED THAT IT HAD GRANTED AGREEMENT FOR A NEW LAO AMBASSADOR TO THAILAND. FOR THEIR PART THE LAO, ON THE EVE OF WONGSE'S VISIT, RELEASED FIFTEEN RTHAI CITIZENS WHO HAD BEEN HELD PRISONER IN LAO JAILS AND PRISON CAMPS. EARLIER ON JANUARY 6, SEVEN OTHER

THAI CITIZENS WERE HANDED OVER TO THAI AUTHORITIES AT
CHONG MEK PASS ON THE CHAMPASSAK-UBON RATCHANTHANI
BORDER.

5. PARTICIPATION OF NONG KHAI GOVERNOR CHAMNAN IN THE
WONGSE DELEGATION'S TALKS IN VIENTIANE FOLLOWED PARTI-
CIPATION OF OTHER LOCAL THAI OFFICIALS IN TRANS-MEKONG
TALKS EARLIER IN THE MONTH. NAKHON PHANOM GOVERNOR
SOMPHON MET WITH SAVANNAKHET OFFICIALS AT MUKDAHAN ON
JANUARY 11-13 ALONG WITH LOCAL THAI AND LAO MILITARY
OFFICIALS. THE MUKDAHAN MEETING RESULTED IN: 1) A
THAI PROPOSAL FOR MONTHLY LOCAL-LEVEL MEETINGS BETWEEN
THAI AND LAO BORDER OFFICIALS; 2) PROGRESS TOWARD THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF A NAVIGATION LINE ALONG A PORTION OF
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THE MEKONG (INCLUDING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT
SURVEY UNIT); 3) TALKS BETWEEN LOCAL MILITARY OFFICIALS
CONCERNING THE AVOIDANCE OF SKIRMISHES ALONG THE RIVER;

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AND 4) DISCUSSION REGARDING THE REPATRIATION OF LAO REFUGEES AND AN ENDING OF ARMS SMUGGLING INTO THAILAND.

6. DESPITE A PERCEPTIBLE WARMING OF THAI-LAO RELATIONS AND TANGIBLE PROGRESS IN A NUMBER OF AREAS, MUTUAL RECRIMINATIONS OVER ALLEGED BORDER VIOLATIONS CONTINUE. (THE LAO, HOWEVER, HAVE RECENTLY BECOME CAUTIOUS IN ATTACKING THE CENTRAL THAI AUTHORITIES, PREFERRING TO LAY BLAME FOR THE VIOLATIONS AT THE FEET OF LOCAL THAI OFFICIALS.) MOREOVER, MUTUAL SUSPICIONS REGARDING EACH NATION'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE OTHER'S DOMESTIC INSURGENCY REMAINS HIGH.

7. NEVERTHELESS, RESULTS OF THE BILATERAL TALKS THUS FAR SEEM TO HAVE MET SOME OF THE OBJECTIVES SET DOWN BY THAI PRIME MINISTER DRIANGSAK FOLLOWING HIS DECEMBER MEETING WITH SOUBANH. AT THAT TIME HE SAID: "THREE TO FOUR SUBJECTS OF IMPORTANCE (EXIST) WHERE WE LACK CONFIDENTIAL

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DETAILS..OVERFLIGHTS AND REGULAR OPERATIONS OF COMMERCIAL PLANES; TRANSIT OF GOODS AND BARTER TRADE; EXCHANGE OF TOURISTS (AND) A SUBJECT OF MAJOR IMPORTANCE FOR BOTH COUNTRIES...THE EXERCISE OF SPECIAL CARE THAT MISUNDERSTANDINGS DO NOT ARISE ALONG OUR COMMON BORDER THUS PREVENTING CLASHES OR ANY UNEXPECTED INCIDENTS FROM OCCURRING..."

8. COMMENT: SHORT OF VIETNAMESE-LAO WILLINGNESS TO DISREGARD THEIR "INTERNATIONAL PROLETARIAN" OBLIGATION TO ASSIST THE CPT IN ITS RESISTANCE TO THE RTG, NO GENUINE TOTAL RECONCILIATION BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAOS SEEMS POSSIBLE. MOREOVER, GIVEN VIETNAM'S APPARENT DETERMINATION TO CONTROL THE DIRECTION OF LAO FOREIGN POLICY, THERE IS PRESUMABLY A LIMIT BEYOND WHICH LAO-THAI RAPPROCHEMENT CAN NOT PROCEED. DESPITE THESE LIMITATIONS, THERE REMAINS ROOM FOR SIGNIFICANT ACCOMMODATION OF MUTUAL BILATERAL INTERESTS IN 1) THE REDUCTION OF BORDER TENSIONS; 2) RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THAI-LAO TRADE AND COMMUNICATION (ESPECIALLY AIR); AND 3) REDUCTION OF MUTUAL VILIFICATION IN EACH NATION'S PRESS AND OFFICIAL STATEMENTS.
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